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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Ministerial round table: accountability for realizing de facto equality for women and girls

Chair's summary

1. On 10 March 2015, the Commission on the Status of Women held a ministerial round table on the topic "Accountability for realizing de facto equality for women and girls" under the overall theme "Priorities for future action to realize gender equality, the empowerment of women and the human rights of women and girls". The participants in round table focused on the sharing of national experiences, good practices and challenges related to ensuring accountability for gender equality commitments and the realization of women's human rights, particularly through the accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and in the post-2015 development agenda.

2. The Secretary-General of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, Betto Bättig, chaired the round table, and the Sex Discrimination Commissioner of Australia, Elizabeth Broderick, served as moderator. Ministers and high-level officials from 16 Member States participated in the interactive dialogue.

Strengthening national and international accountability mechanisms for gender equality

3. There was strong consensus among participants that effective national accountability mechanisms and institutions were critical for the implementation of national and international gender equality commitments. Participants noted the important roles of national gender equality machineries and national human rights institutions as mechanisms for monitoring and overseeing cross-sectoral responsibilities to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and realize women's human rights. A number of participants gave examples of the ways

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in which independent regulatory bodies, such as equality and anti-discrimination ombudsmen, empower women to claim their human rights and seek redress for violations.

4. Many participants expressed concern, however, about the lack of political will and of financial and human resources available to institutions and mechanisms for promoting gender equality. Participants emphasized that such institutions and mechanisms must be properly resourced so that they may be responsive to the needs of women and girls and have the power and capacity to ensure compliance with commitments and obligations. Many participants stressed the crucial role of civil society, including women's rights organizations in holding Governments to account for gender equality and in advancing women's human rights.

5. A number of speakers noted the importance of using the Beijing Platform for Action and international human rights treaties and mechanisms to effectively influence the design of laws, policies and programmes. Participants acknowledged that reporting to international treaty bodies, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and international processes, such as the universal periodic review of the Human Rights Council, strengthen government accountability for gender equality. Civil society shadow reporting, as well as public debates on State party reports, were highlighted as integral aspects of these accountability mechanisms.

Laws, policies and monitoring as central to accountability

6. A number of participants highlighted national action plans for gender equality that set clear targets and indicators and were regularly monitored as effective means by which to promote gender mainstreaming and ensure that all parts of government are responsible for achieving gender equality. Participants also identified increased coordination between gender equality machineries and executive, legislative and judicial bodies as key for ensuring accountability for gender equality by all State actors. A number of participants drew attention to the significant role that parliaments could assume in holding all ministries accountable for the implementation of gender equality action plans and commitments, including by conducting parliamentary fact-finding missions to assess government compliance. The equally important role of local authorities in implementing national action plans and ensuring accountability for gender equality was also noted by participants.

7. Participants highlighted the importance of being able to track the use of budget allocations from a gender perspective and the key role of financial oversight bodies tasked with monitoring government spending in accordance with gender equality action plans and commitments. Several countries reported the use of gender-responsive budgeting in their national budget cycles to support the effective and efficient allocation and spending of available resources to promote gender equality and recommended it as an important monitoring tool.

8. Persistent discrimination against women in the law was highlighted by a number of speakers as a major obstacle to the enjoyment by women and girls of their human rights. At the same time, ministers reported on progress in reforming legal and policy frameworks, including the introduction or strengthening of gender equality legislation, constitutional amendments to guarantee gender equality and non-discrimination, policies to advance women's economic empowerment and the introduction of quotas to increase women's participation in political and

decision-making bodies. Speakers agreed that all remaining discriminatory laws must be removed.

9. Several participants stressed the importance of reporting and evaluation as tools to promote accountability at the national, regional and international levels. It was noted that, in order to be truly accountable for realizing gender equality and the human rights of women and girls, constant reviews and evaluations of the impact of laws, policies and programmes were imperative. By conducting reviews and evaluations, problems could be identified and adjustments made in order to deliver results and benefits for all women and girls. High-quality data were seen as crucial for effectively monitoring progress and their collection should be a priority.

Increasing private sector accountability for gender equality

10. A number of participants stressed the importance of ensuring private sector accountability for gender equality and the need to monitor the impact of the private sector on gender equality and the enjoyment by women of their human rights. One approach was to create incentives for the private sector, for example by underscoring that, in addition to being a human rights issue, advancing gender equality could be good for business.

11. Participants highlighted that, as power in the private sector had historically been in the hands of men, involving men in efforts to increase the number of women in leadership positions in the private sector was critical. One initiative involved requesting male chief executive officers to use their positions of influence to support women in building their leadership skills and to commit to publicly report on progress made towards specific targets. Participants also suggested that parliaments had an important role to play in making the private sector more accountable, for example by forming specialized parliamentary oversight committees. A good practice was the establishment of a quota of 40 per cent for women on the boards of publicly traded companies. Multi-stakeholder accountability frameworks involving the government, civil society and the private sector were also suggested as successful means to increase private sector accountability.

12. Speakers gave examples of successful collaborative partnerships to promote accountability for the advancement of women's human rights, including within the private sector, such as the establishment of a formal memorandum of understanding between the private sector, civil society and the prime minister that focused on increasing women's participation on the boards of private companies. A multi-stakeholder cooperation initiative to promote accountability included programmes and initiatives to promote women's economic empowerment and financial independence through regional trainings and the formation of agreements between businesses, educational institutions and various levels of government at the regional, national and local levels.